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ABSTRACT

Because of publicity given to volunteerism by the Reagan administration, increasing attention is being paid to the role of voluntary programs in human services. National volunteer agencies have become critical of professional social workers' resistance to dealing with volunteers. Social work schools are being urged to include more courses on volunteerism and volunteer administration in their curricula. According to a 1979 report, not a single college offered an academic degree in volunteer administration. A recent project, Voluntarism and Social Work Practice, sponsored largely by volunteer agencies, focused on developing teaching materials on volunteerism and making recommendations for curriculum development regarding volunteerism. Six social work schools--the Universities of Atlanta, Texas (at Austin), Maryland (at Baltimore), California (at Berkeley), Toronto, and Case Western Reserve--participated in the project, in which networks of faculty and local volunteer association representatives met to discuss mutual concerns. Results indicated that schools provided few opportunities for students to do field work with volunteers or study the role of the volunteer. Findings also indicated that social workers do resist using volunteers, probably out of job insecurity. As a result of this project, several schools have instituted courses related to volunteerism in social work. (LP)

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VOLUNTEERISM AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Southwestern Social Science Association Meeting

Houston, Texas, March 18, 1983

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Introduction

About nine months ago, the Wall Street Journal featured a front page article with the following headline: "Voluntarism, So Far, Fails To Compensate For U.S. Budget Cuts." (Schellhardt, 1982). The article described the efforts of public and private human service organizations in trying to cope with drastically reduced federal grants for their programs. The writer of the article emphasized that President Reagan's appeals to the private sector and the American spirit of volunteerism had not made a significant impact on the gap between need and dwindling resources. Officials from the human services were quoted as saying that Mr. Reagan had raised expectations unrealistically high when he gave the public the impression that volunteers and private contributions could overcome the shortfall created by federal budget cuts.

Despite the President's overstatement of what volunteers may be able to do to compensate for sharp decreases in federal outlays for services, voluntarism seems to be riding a wave of popularity. In preparation for this assignment I talked with a number of administrators of volunteer programs to gain some perspective on "the state of the art" in Texas. The participation in the state is thriving although no statistical data were available for comparative purposes.

The wife of the former Governor, Mrs. Rita Clements, reported that volunteer time in Texas exceeds 780 million hours a year - and she estimated

the cost value of that time at $3.6 billion dollars.

The Director of Volunteer Services for the largest Texas state agency, the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, reported that 12,000 volunteers regularly serve in that agency's twenty-eight facilities. Overall, the number of volunteers has decreased, but the amount of cash contributions from volunteers had increased significantly. It appears that many people who formerly volunteered now have joined the labor force and do not have the time to give of themselves. However, these individuals are maintaining their commitments to these programs through donations of funds.

A surprising revelation was that the number of men volunteers last year in the state agency exceeded women (51% of the volunteers were males). Several volunteer coordinators gave the following reasons for this change: women who formerly volunteered during the day have returned to full-time employment and their new schedules do not allow time for volunteering either during the day or night; many men volunteers serve in administrative functions in volunteer activities and are maintaining their commitment; a number of men are retiring from employment and are seeking volunteer outlets to stay active.

Historically, voluntarism has been a significant contributor to the quality of life in our communities. From barn raising to small town fire departments, Americans have been organizing for years to support a staggering array of causes. One of the most encouraging changes taking place in voluntarism in Texas today is the inclusion of every economic group in the movement. In the early days of volunteering, the upper and middle classes of society predominated. Today one finds volunteers from every walk of life participating in neighborhood groups fighting zoning changes, protecting the environment and giving some direct service to community orgarizations.

Astute managers of volunteer programs long have recognized that volunteers both served and are served. It is a vehicle for self realization and personal growth for many individuals. Not only do volunteers realize benefits but the organizations they serve are enriched by their efforts.

There are those who claim that it is not appropriate to include as volunteers those individuals who may derive some benefit from their volunteering. But, history is replete with examples of individuals volunteering for motives other than pure altruism. Certainly frontier life volunteers were guided by enlightened self interest because of the necessity of depending upon neighbors for survival. Today, social approval, acquired through volunteer efforts is crucial to career oriented business people, members of fraternities and soroities, and community minded civic clubs. University administrations consider community service as one component of an individual faculty member's eligibility for merit salary increases. Volunteering is getting to be "the thing to do."

Because so much publicity has been given to voluntarism by President Reagan, increasing attention is being given to the administration of volunteer programs. Stated another way, human service agencies are expected to be good stewards of volunteer talents. Management of volunteer programs appears to be emerging as a promising career opportunity. Schools of social work are being urged by national voluntary agencies (such as Family Service Association of America, The Association of Junior Leagues, Inc., The National Council of Jewish Women and others) to include more curriculum materials on voluntarism in their degree programs. The schools, already hard pressed by other curriculum demands, have been slow to respond to overtures for more curriculum changes.

National voluntary agencies appear dissatisfied with the status of relationships between volunteers and professional social workers. A common complaint is that social workers do not know how to make effective use of volunteers. Other criticisms include such statements as: social workers often underestimate what the volunteer can do; professional staff members do not cooperate wholeheartedly in the training of volunteers, and social workers frequently raise the issue of confidentiality when volunteers want to work with clients or patients in an ongoing counseling capacity. A more serious concern is the charge that social workers are suspicious of volunteers and fear their replacement by the volunteer.

Volunteers are welcomed in organizations where they provide the bulk of services (Crisis Hot Line Services, Rape Crisis Centers, Big Brothers-Big Sisters Agencies, for example) and are permitted to use their talents in working directly with clients in a supportive, therapeutic relationship.

Social Work Education and Volunteerism

While the profession of social work can trace its early beginnings to the volunteer movement, social work education has not distinguished itself in either educating volunteer administrators or in teaching social work students about effective working relationships with volunteers.

Felice Perlmutter, in a recent issue of Journal of Voluntary Action Research (April-September, 1982), reported that a 1979 national survey of colleges offering educational programs in volunteer administration found that not one college offered an academic degree in the field. She found that a major barrier to initiating a full scale educational program

is the reluctance of the university to start a new program unless there is "no financial risk to the institution."

Florence Schwartz has reported on a recently completed project, Voluntarism and Social Work Practice, which was sponsored by the Association of Junior Leagues, Family Service Association of America, the National Assembly of Health and Welfare Organizations, the National Council of Jewish Women, and Volunteer: National Center for Citizen Involvement, with the encouragement of the Council on Social Work Education. The project had several objectives but the ones which had special relevance for social work education were: 1) to develop teaching materials on voluntarism and 2) to make recommendations for curriculum development for classroom and field work reagarding volunteers (Schwartz, 1982).

Six schools of social work participated in the endeavor including: University of Atlanta, University of Texas at Austin, University of Maryland at Baltimore, University of California at Berkeley, Case Western Reserve University, and University of Toronto. Each school convened a network group which included faculty and local representatives from the national voluntary associations participating in the endeavor.

Perhaps the greatest benefit the project offered was the opportunity for faculty of schools to meet with volunteer associations on an ongoing, planned basis to discuss mutual concerns and to develop a relationship of trust, respect and open communications. Out of the many meetings came an overwhelming discovery. Schools of social work provide very few opportunities for students to work with volunteers in field assignments and to study the roles volunteers play in human service organiza-

tions. For the most part, social workers learn about working with volunteers when they begin professional practice in agencies (Schwartz, 1982).

Another issue that was identified was the problem of resistance of social workers to the effective utilization of volunteers in the delivery of social work services.

Through the interest generated by the project, courses on Voluntarism and Social Work Practice have been initiated at San Francisco State University School of Social Work and Hunter College. The University of California at Berkeley planned a similar offering in the 1983 academic year. At the University of Texas at Austin, the B.S.W. field work program has made progress in incorporating direct work with volunteers as a regular part of field work education. Objectives of the field course and field seminar are being revised to include this new educational activity.

While the accomplishments of the project on Voluntarism and Social Work Practice may appear modest, particularly in relation to graduate programs, nevertheless a beginning has been made and social work educators now are more sensitive to the need for including more curriculum content on volunteers. A sign of growing interest in this area is increased activity in continuing education. Agencies are beginning to contract with schools of social work for continuing education sessions on voluntarism for their agency supervisory personnel.

Concluding Observations

Despite the apparent aloofness of social work educators toward the volunteer field, administrators of volunteer programs still are interested

in developing linkages with universities in general and schools of social work in particular. Volunteer coordinators are receptive to invitations to visit classes to discuss the role of volunteers in the service delivery system. Many are willing to have students undertake special projects as part of field work such as planning orientation programs for special groups of new volunteers (the elderly, ethnic groups, the physically handicapped and others).

Administrators of volunteer programs also appear ready for faculty members to visit their facilities and to participate in continuing education sessions for volunteers.

Volunteer coordinators maintain full schedules recruiting, training, placing and supervising volunteers. While they observe strong liaison relationships with other state and national volunteer organiaations, the rank and file volunteer administrator does not regularly read social and behavioral science publications. They seem to welcome suggestions, however, about readings which are appropriate for their field. In fact, most volunteer coordinators are receptive to extending knowledge about volunteerism and probably would entertain suggestions for modest research projects. The volunteer program in the geographic area of a school of social work could be the site for faculty research endeavors.

Social work educators should be sensitive to the criticism that social work practitioners are resisting the use of volunteers in the delivery of services. The resistance may indicate a sense of insecurity on the part of social workers - a fear that they may be replaced by volunteers - rather than a genuine concern for the well being of clients. This is the

sort of problem which can be addressed in classroom presentations and field work educational experiences. There certainly is ample evidence that well screened and properly trained volunteers can be challenged to provide an inportant level of service to clients who may be either underserved or unserved.

Social work education has a responsibility to join with administrators of volunteer programs to define volunteer roles and functions and to foster a more cooperative relationship between the volunteer and the professional practitioner.

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